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THE SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF UNEMPLOYMENT IN EDMONTON

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ABSTRACT

Unemployment has reached crisis proportions in Canada. Yet despite widespread concern about the problem, little is known about its social and psychological consequences. Using data from the 1983 Edmonton Area Study (n = 420) this paper sheds light on the human impact of high unemployment. Consistent with research in Britain and the U.S., we find that the jobless are less educated, and are likely to be blue-collar workers with a history of unemployment and with a spouse not working. Furthermore, the unemployed in our sample have lower levels of satisfaction with their health, non-work activities and standard of living. Most importantly, they report significantly higher levels of depression and feelings of powerlessness than the employed. We go beyond existing research in documenting how feelings of job security and financial optimism about the future among the employed labour force are undermined by the recession. The final section of the paper addresses the pressing issue of youth unemployment. After a brief review of available literature we tentatively conclude that jobless youth are more likely to exhibit apathy than to mobilize politically.

THE SOCIAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF UNEMPLOYMENT IN EDMONTON*

1) Introduction

Unemployment has reached crisis proportions in Canada. In January 1984 the number of unemployed rose to 1,473,000 for a seasonally adjusted jobless rate of 11.2%. While this rate is down somewhat from the post-depression record of 12.8% in December 1982, these official statistics fail to capture the full extent of what is now viewed as the number one economic and social problem in the country. Yet despite widespread concern about unemployment, we know surprisingly little about its human impact.

Looking beyond the economic dimensions of the current recession, this paper will focus on the social and psychological consequences of high unemployment. Using survey data for the city of Edmonton, we address in turn three questions: First, how do the employed and the unemployed differ in terms of personal, work-related and financial characteristics? Second, what are the social-psychological consequences of joblessness? Third, to what extent has the prolonged recession with its chronically high unemployment levels created a general climate of insecurity within the employed labour force? The most alarming unemployment problem exists among youths, with 18.7% of those under age 25 being jobless in January 1984. Unable to address with our survey data the pressing concerns regarding youth unemployment -- in particular whether it will generate collective political agitation or personalized responses characterized

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by apathy and withdrawal -- we devote the last section of the paper to a review of available evidence on these issues.

To set the stage for our investigation of the above questions, it is useful to begin by examining how unemployment is defined and measured. Technically the term "unemployed" means being out of work and looking for work. The extent of unemployment in this country is determined by the monthly Statistics Canada Labour Force survey in which about 40,000 adult Canadians are interviewed (an individual remains part of the sample for six months and then is replaced by another randomly selected adult). Those individuals in the sample not actively looking for work as well as those who have chosen to work inside the home (e.g. housewives) are not considered unemployed.

This definition underestimates the extent of unemployment in Canada since "discouraged workers" (a better term would be "discouraged job-seekers") who have given up looking for work are not counted among the unemployed. For example, the January 1984 unemployment figures exclude 129,000 individuals who gave up looking for work in that month because they believed none was available (Globe and Mail, 4 February 1984). In addition, we must take into account Statistics Canada's estimate that over one-quarter of all part-time workers would prefer full-time jobs (Globe and Mail, 7 January 1984). It is a totally rational response to give up looking for a job if no employment opportunities exist, or to take a part-time job if nothing is available full-time. Critics of Statistics Canada's methodology often point to the situation in Newfoundland (Globe and Mail, 24 September 1983) where over 40% of the unemployed live in communities with only one local employer. When these individuals are asked whether they have actively looked for a job in the last four weeks -- the Labour Force Survey question -- they typically answer "no" because they realize the local industry is not hiring. However, by asking whether these individuals want

work we discover that the jobless rate doubles. In sum, present methods of tabulating the unemployment rate systematically underestimate the severity of the problem.

Canada's unemployment rates have not always been as high as they are today. Going back twenty years, we find that between 1963 and 1969, the official rates never exceeded 5.5%. They then began to climb slowly with rates between 5% and 6% from 1970 to 1974, and between 7% and 8% from 1975 to 1981 (Economic Council of Canada, 1982:5). By 1982 the national rate was around 10%; 1983 saw unemployment jump to over 12%. Today, it remains steady around the 11% level. Predictions of double-digit unemployment for the next several years has, slowly, shifted goverment economic policy away from its preoccupation with inflation toward job creation. Again, the outlook is bleakest for youth: the Department of Employment estimates that one in five persons under 25 will be jobless into 1986 (Globe and Mail, 13 September 1983).

In addition to age, unemployment rates vary according to sex and geographic region. With respect to sex differences, the under-25 jobless rate in January 1984 was 20.6% for men and 16.5% for women. This difference may reflect more "discouraged workers" among young women, as well as the fact that the early 20s are prime child-bearing years. The rates converge for those in the over 25 age group: 8.7% for men compared to 9.3% for women. Looking at regional trends, we find the highest unemployment rate in Newfoundland (19.2%) and the lowest in Saskatchewan (7.4%). One of the major characteristics of Canada's regional disparities has been chronically high levels of unemployment in the Atlantic provinces. Underlying these regional variations in unemployment are historical patterns of uneven industrial development.

Alberta has been especially hard-hit by the recession. The province's employment picture has been dramatically transformed, from extreme labour

shortages and an unemployment rate around 3% - 4% during the economic boom of the 1970s, to an 11% jobless rate today. The city of Edmonton's unemployment rate has jumped over ten percentage points, from 3.7% in 1979 to 14.3% in January 1984. Of all the major cities in Canada, only St. John's and Victoria exceed this rate. Edmonton thus provides an ideal setting for examining the social-psychological impact of unemployment. If high levels of joblessness and the personal experience of being out of work do take a human toll -- as we fully expect them to -- then certainly we should find evidence of this in Edmonton. Futhermore, because of the rapid change from boom to bust individual experiences of hard times may be more acute.

2) The Human Costs of Unemployment

Job loss brings obvious financial hardships, but at least as devastating for the individual is a host of negative social-psychological consequences. These are the least tangible manifestations of the unemployment problem, and consequently are not adequately understood (Jahoda, 1981). It has been suggested that researchers' neglect of the social effects of unemployment is itself a reflection of a tendency to regard unemployment as a problem only for those most directly involved (Hakim, 1983). An additional reason for our inattention to the human costs of joblessness may be found in the assumption of Keynesian economics -- the foundation of Canadian government economic policies in the post-WWII period -- that unemployment is a purely economic phenomenon with no attendant psychological consequences (Jacobson, 1978:1). In short, economic policy makers have taken it for granted that the unemployed worker will re-enter the labour market in the same state of physical and mental health as when he or she was laid off.

Research conducted mainly in the United States and Britain challenges this Keynesian assumption by clearly documenting the personal trauma associated with

unemployment. A study of plant closings by Kasl, Gore and Cobb (1975) found that the greatest incidence of self-reported ill-health among middle-aged, male factory workers was during the time leading up to layoffs. This suggests that the anticipation of joblessness may be as stressful as the event itself. In the only comparable Canadian study, Grayson and his colleagues (1982) have documented the psychological strain experienced by workers and their spouses following the decision by SKF management to close their Scarborough, Ontario, plant.

Furthermore, research findings consistently demonstrate that unemployed individuals develop negative self images because they tend to take personal blame for their plight (Cohn, 1978; Hayes and Nutman, 1981). And given that job loss is associated with a decline in one's income level and overall social status, the unemployed will be vulnerable to the generally higher levels of psychological distress prevalent among lower-income groups (see Kessler, 1982; Kohn, 1973). Longitudinal British research similarly documents significantly higher levels of psychological distress among the jobless (Harris, 1984:89). The link between unemployment and a wide range of psychological symptoms which may impair daily functioning becomes even stronger when it is recognized that such symptoms usually abate after the individual returns to work. This observation simply underlines the importance of the work ethic in western capitalist societies (for Canadian data see Burstein et al., 1975), and how the individual's self-concept is inextricably bound up with gainful employment.

The stress of being out of work has more than only psychological manifestations. Brenner (1973), tracing U.S. mortality rates over time, has statistically documented their close association with fluctuations in the business cycle. According to Brenner, changes in the unemployment level can also be used to predict rates of alcoholism, cirhosis of the liver, admissions to mental hospitals -- and even suicide and murder. Brenner's research has

generated much controversy. Adam's (1981) attempt to test Brenner's model for Canada finds mainly negative or, at best, weak positive correlations between the unemployment rate on one hand and rates of mortality and psychological morbidity on the other. Only the incidence of mortality due to heart disease, and psychiatric admissions in the psychotic category were positively related to changes in the unemployment rate between 1950 and 1977. In addition, while one may discern statistical relationships among various social and economic trends, it is far more difficult to determine that, for example, the unemployed are disproportionately represented in alcoholism, suicide or mental hopsital admission rates.

However, there is other highly suggestive evidence regarding the causal connection between unemployment and suicide. Recent investigations have found that half of all attempted suicides among British males involve the unemployed (Harris, 1984:90). Ever since Durkheim (1951, originally published 1897) discovered a positive association between rapid economic change and rates of suicide, researchers have had difficulty unravelling the nature of this relationship (Hayes and Nutman, 1981:77-78). Durkheim's explanation of suicide rates rested on his understanding of the importance of social integration: in periods of economic boom and bust individual's ties with social groups may weaken, thereby creating feelings of isolation conducive to suicidal behaviour. As Boor (1980:1096) argues in an article documenting a high correlation between suicide rates (from 1962 to 1976) and unemployment levels in Canada, France, Germany, Japan, Sweden and the U.S., future research should attempt to pin-point which social and psychological factors associated with unemployment may trigger suicidal behaviour.

The above research helps us to begin to understand the human costs of unemployment. Yet one cannot simply extend research findings from other

countries to Canada, given cross-national variations in patterns of social relations, value systems, social supports and "safety net" social welfare programs. Unfortunately there is a paucity of Canadian research on the subject. This has prompted the Canadian Council on Social Development to plan a national study of the social costs of high unemployment (Mackay, 1983:34). It is our intention, then, to begin to shed light upon how unemployment in Canada affects individuals -- both the jobless and those still employed -- socially and psychologically. To anticipate our findings presented below, we confirm that Edmontonians are no different from individuals elsewhere in their experience of unemployment as a great personal crisis. Furthermore, we go beyond much existing research by documenting the general climate of pessimism and economic insecurity which wears away on those who remain employed during a prolonged recession.

3) Survey Findings

Each February the Population Research Laboratory in the University of Alberta's Sociology Department conducts a survey of adult Edmonton residents. In the 1983 Edmonon Area Study (EAS), a random sample of 420 individuals participated in one-hour long structured interviews focusing on a wide range of issues (see Kinzel, 1983). The 1983 EAS had as its special focus the quality of working life, and thus included a large number of questions about work history, current jobs, and attitudes towards work, along with measures of personal characteristics, attitudes and behaviour. More specifically, standard social-psychological measures of how individuals assess their financial situation, satisfaction with key areas of their life, as well as their feelings of depression and powerlessness were included. For all of these measures, we make comparisons between the unemployed and the full-time employed labour force.

a) Characteristics of the Employed and the Unemployed:

Table 1 provides a comparison of selected personal, work-related and financial characteristics of 228 full-time employees and 39 unemployed individuals. Looking first at personal characteristics, we note that the unemployed are predominantly male, are somewhat less likely to be married, and are slightly younger than the employed.[1] However, none of these differences is substantial. Only on three personal characteristics do we find statistically significant differences between the employed and the unemployed. Specifically, the jobless are less likely to have a spouse who is gainfully employed. Furthermore, they have fewer years of education and only 21% (compared with 50% of the employed) have a post-secondary degree or diploma. These educational differences suggest that those with higher education are able to achieve greater job security, even in times of recession.

Turning to work-related characteristics, we first note that 64% of the unemployed are in some type of blue-collar work. This is consistent with our findings regarding the lower educational levels among the unemployed. The unemployed are also significantly different from the employed with respect to the average number of months worked full-time in 1982 (7 versus 11). In addition, the experience of unemployment is not new for these individuals, who have been out of work an average of 6 times in the past. In contrast, the employed have only experienced approximately three bouts of joblessness.

Finally, the financial circumstances of the unemployed differ significantly from the employed in four important respects. First, it is not surprising that their 1982 household incomes are about $10,000 less ($28,153 versus $38,168). Second, individual incomes are also about $10,000 less than those for the full-time employed ($17,608 versus $27,598). Third, only 23% of unemployed individuals own homes in contrast to a 49% rate of home ownership among the

TABLE 1: Comparison of Selected Characteristics of Full-Time Employed and Unemployed Labour Force Members.

	Full-Time Employed (n = 228)		Unemployed (n = 39)
Personal Characteristics			
Sex (% male)	66.7%		74.4%
Age (average years)	34.6		33.0
Marital status (% married or common law)	53.1%		46.1%
Number of children (average for married/common law only)	1.05		0.67
Spouse also employed (% for married/common law only)	73.4%	*	55.6%
Education (average years)	13.9	*	11.5
Education (% with completed post-secondary education; e.g. degree or diploma)	50.0%	*	20.5%
Work-related Characteristics			
Occupation			
% Managerial/professional/technical	39%		18%
% Clerical/sales/services	34%		18%
% Other (largely blue-collar)	27%	*	64%
Months employed full-time in 1982 (average)	11.1	*	6.97
Unemployed before moving to Edmonton (% for those who moved to Edmonton)	37.7	*	54.8
Number of full-time jobs ever held (average)	5.18	*	8.64
Number of times ever unemployed (average)	2.59	*	5.73

Table 1 continued....

Table 1 (continued)

	Full-Time Employed (n = 228)		Unemployed (n = 39)
Financial Characteristics			
Household income in 1982 (average)@	$38168	*	$28153
Individual income in 1982 (average)@	$27598	*	$17608
Monthly rent or mortgage payment (average)	$495		$437
Home-ownership (%)	48.7%	*	23.1%
Received financial help from relatives in past two years (%)	15.0%	*	28.2%

* Differences between statistics calculated for full-time employed and unemployed are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

@ Averages estimated from mid-points of categories in a 26 category income question.

employed sample. And fourth, 28% of the unemployed had received financial help from relatives in the past two years compared to only 15% of the employed. In short, as one might expect the financial resources of the unemployed are meagre and strained in comparison to the employed.

b) Social-Psychological Outcomes:

Beginning with feelings of financial optimism and pessimism, as expected the unemployed are significantly less likely to consider themselves financially better off than a year ago. But it is interesting to observe that among the full-time employed less than half (46%) agreed that their financial circumstances had actually improved. In both the employed and the unemployed groups, just over half expected their financial situations to improve in the coming year. Guarded optimism about the future, so it seems, remains a central coping device for people in recessionary times.

Table 2 also reports mean responses for six questions tapping various dimensions of satisfaction. Again comparing the employed and the unemployed, we discover that both groups are reasonably satisfied with family life and friendships. Yet the unemployed are significantly less satisfied with their health, non-work activities and standard of living than are the gainfully employed. In sum, the experience of being out of work has a rather pervasive influence on how the unemployed view their lives, although satisfaction with family life and friendships appear less affected.

The psychological hardship of unemployment is perhaps most clearly revealed in feelings of depression. The unemployed reported significantly worse scores on six measures of depression -- feeling depressed, feeling lonely, feeling that people are unfriendly, talking less than usual, inability to shake off the blues even with the help of family and friends, and harbouring thoughts about one's life being a failure. The differences between the employed and the unemployed

TABLE 2: Social-Psychological Outcomes of Unemployment.

	Full-Time Employed (n = 228)		Unemployed (n = 39)
Financial Optimism and Pessimism			
Percent considering themself (and their family) better off than in previous year	45.6%	*	21.1%
Percent expecting to be better off financially in a year	51.1%		57.6%
Satisfaction measures (averages) @			
Family life	5.84		5.74
Friendships	5.69		5.41
Health	5.65	*	4.85
Non-work activities	5.73	*	5.26
Standard of living	5.59	*	4.85
Life in general	5.75	*	4.97
Depression measures (averages)#			
Felt depressed	3.69	*	3.33
Felt lonely	3.83	*	3.41
Felt people were unfriendly	3.86	*	3.31
Talked less than usual	3.67	*	3.36
Couldn't shake off the blues even with help from family and friends	4.04	*	3.72
Thought your life had been a failure	4.49	*	3.95

Table 2 continued ....

Table 2 (continued)

	Full-Time Employed (n = 228)		Unemployed (n = 39)
Powerlessness measures (averages)©			
I have little control over the things that happen to me	2.42	*	2.92
There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life	2.38	*	3.28
Sometimes I feel that I'm being pushed around in life	2.52	*	3.13
What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me	6.03	*	5.31
Suicide: Percent though of committing suicide in past year	4.4%	*	15.4%

* Differences between statistics calculated for full-time employed and unemployed are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

@ Average responses on a seven point scale: very dissatisfied (1) to (7) very satisfied.

Average responses on a five point scale: Always (1); Often (2); Sometimes (3); Rarely (4); Never (5).

© Average responses on a seven point scale: strongly disagree (1) to (7) strongly agree.

are statistically significant for all six measures, again suggesting that depression is a major personal consequence of job loss.

People who have been laid off frequently translate this crisis into a generalized feeling of powerlessness. Unable to prevent their job loss, they sense a lack of control over their lives. We thus find that the unemployed experience significantly more powerlessness as measured by the four items reported in Table 2. More precisely, in contrast to the overall greater sense of control and personal efficacy expressed by the employed, individuals without work are more likely to report the following negative beliefs: that they have little control over things that happen to them; that there is little they can do to change many important things in their life; that they are being pushed around in their life; and, finally, that they have little influence on what happens to them in the future.

Table 2 also examines whether the unemployed are more likely to have contemplated suicide. There is a significant difference between the two groups in this respect. Just over 15% of the unemployed reported having thought of committing suicide in the past year, compared with only slightly more than 4% of the employed. This finding must be treated with due caution, especially in light of our above discussion of previous research on the topic. Moreover, the actual number of individuals involved (10 of the employed and 6 of the unemployed) is too small to warrant any firm conclusions. Nonetheless, this finding supports arguments in favour of making counselling and other types of assistance available to the unemployed to help them cope effectively with the psychological trauma of their job loss.

c) Indirect Effects of High Unemployment on the Employed:

The recession and record high unemployment levels are new phenomena facing Edmontonians today. By comparing the boom years of 1978-81 with the onset of

the recession in 1982 and its full impact during 1983, it is possible to identify how this precipitous economic downturn affected the feelings of financial security among the general population. This line of inquiry allows us to better understand how recession and high unemployment may have a pervasive, if indirect, effect on the outlook of the entire labour force.

Table 3 displays unemployment rates for Edmonton between 1978 and 1983. With rising unemployment, especially in 1982 and 1983, there is a corresponding decline in the proportion of the full- and part-time employed labour force considering themselves better off financially than in the previous year, expecting to be better off financially a year in the future, and feeling positive about their job security. In all three cases the drop was considerable: In 1982, 61% considered themselves and their families better off than in previous year, while only 42% felt this optimism in 1983. Likewise, the percentage of the workforce expecting to be better off financially in a year dropped from 62% in 1979 to 47% in 1983. Job security has also been eroded, with 89% feeling secure in their jobs in 1978 in contrast to 68% who shared this view in 1983.

Are these workers simply responding to media reports of rising unemployment rates, layoffs and shutdowns, or wage freezes by lowering their expectations accordingly? Or are they reacting to more concrete signs of the recession, such as layoffs of coworkers, friends, relatives, or even their own temporary job loss? Table 4 explores the extent to which the immediate labour market experiences of the employed might underlie their reduced financial optimism and heightened sense of job insecurity.

To begin, we can see that about 22% of the part-time and 8% of the full-time workers personally experienced layoffs in the year prior to the 1983 EAS. Roughly equivalent percentages of these two groups (22% part-time, 10%

TABLE 3: Rising Unemployment and Changing Perceptions of Financial and Job Security among Full-time and Part-time Employed Labour Force Members, Edmonton, 1978-1983.

	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983
Edmonton unemployment rate*	4.7	3.7	4.0	4.1	6.0	12.3
Percent considering themself (and their family) better off than in previous year	53.6	59.4	56.8	61.2	49.3	42.0
Percent expecting to be better off financially in a year	58.0	61.9	56.6	58.1	49.9	46.7
Percent positive about their job security@	88.9	----	----	----	77.9	67.9
(Sample size)	224	277	310	260	357	274

* Yearly averages for 1978 to 1981; for 1982 and 1983 when unemployment rates were changing more rapidly, the estimates are for the month of February when the Edmonton Area Study was underway.

@ In 1978, the question was asked with four response categories (very poor, poor, good, very good) and the two positive responses are combined. In 1982 and 1983, a seven-response question was used. The three categories at the positive end of the scale are combined for these estimates.

TABLE 4: Concerns about Unemployment among the Currently Full-time and Part-time Employed.

	Full-time Employed (n = 228)		Part-time Employed (n = 46)
Percent personally laid off in past year	7.5%	*	21.7%
Percent who expect to be laid off in next year	9.6%	*	21.7%
Percent with co-workers laid off in past year	50.9%	*	32.6%
Percent who expect their job to be replaced by computers@	7.0%		2.2%

@ Question asked with a 1 - 7 'strongly disagree - strongly agree' set of fixed responses. Scores of 5, 6 and 7 are taken to represent agreement with the statement.

* Differences between statistics calculated for full-time employed and part-time employed are statistically significant ($p < .05$).

full-time) expect to be laid off in the coming year. Another factor which would foster concerns about the security of one's job is layoffs among coworkers. According to Table 4, 51% of the full-time and 33% of the part-time employees had coworkers laid off in the past year. This finding is puzzling in one respect: we have pointed out above that part-time employees are significantly more likely to have experienced layoffs in the past and to expect them in the future. When it comes to layoffs affecting coworkers, the full-time employees report a significantly higher incidence. However, when combining personal and co-worker layoffs we find that between 50% and 60% of both groups had encountered these problems in the previous year. This suggests that unemployment is endemic in both full-time and part-time labour markets.

Finally, it is interesting to discover that little of the apprehension about future job loss is related to automation. In fact, only 7% of the full-time and 2% of the part-time employees expressed fears about technological redundancy. Despite predictions about the potential for widespread unemployment due to the diffusion of micro-electronic technology (see Menzies, 1981; Labour Canada, 1982), Edmonton workers apparently are unaware of any immediate threats in this regard. They are, however, quite cognizant of the negative effects of the recession and have adapted their future expectations to this new reality.

4) Youth Unemployment: Political Mobilization or Apathy?

These findings from the Edmonton Area Study document that unemployment is a determinant of peoples' attitudes about themselves and the world in which they live. However, despite their variations in attitudes, the employed and unemployed persons in our sample have one important characteristic in common, namely that they are roughly the same age. As we suggested earlier, our sample may under-represent the youth unemployed.

But we know from other research that youth unemployment is one of the most important components of the present economic crisis. Historically, young people -- particularly males with low educational levels -- have experienced higher rates of unemployment than has the labour force as a whole. Regardless of whether the overall unemployment rate is seen as low (as in the 1950s) or high (as in the 1980s), youth unemployment has been significantly higher than rates for other age groups. Recall that the January 1984 jobless rate for males between 15-24 years of age was 20.6% -- in contrast to 8.7% unemployment among males 25 and older. In other words, the contours of the overall unemployment problem are sharply defined by the experiences of the young.

Society's definition of unemployment as a serious social problem is inextricably linked with youth unemployment. Why is this? The research literature suggests two explanations. First, there is the tragedy of wasted human resources in that the talents and energies of a whole generation will be lost, thereby undermining the competitiveness and efficiency of the Canadian economy. The fear is that lack of job experience in adolescence will inhibit the development of proper work habits necessary for stable employment in adulthood. Hence the concern that "today's unemployed youth become tomorrow's unemployables" (Deacon, 1983:16). The second explanation focuses upon the anticipated political consequences of youth unemployment (Mungham, 1982).

Occasionally the societal reaction to youth unemployment approaches levels best described as a 'moral panic': "Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their

diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more invisible. Sometimes the object of the panic is quite novel and at other times it is something which has been in existence long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes the panic passes over and is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times it has more serious and long-lasting repercusions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even in the way the society conceives of itself" (Cohen, 1973:9).

Since the middle part of the nineteenth century, youth -- particularly those who are single, male and working class -- have been a popular focus for 'moral panics'. This is evidenced by the enduring concern with youth crime, alcohol and drug use, and the more episodic anxieties about motorcycle gangs. The concern with youth unemployment is a direct continuation of these fears, with the potential political ramifications made more explicit.

Briefly put, the worry expressed by politicians and the mass media is that the unemployed young represent a potential threat to the 'social fabric'. This is amplified in Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's recent comment that high unemployment "is creating social discontent and many other uncertainties in the minds of young people" (Globe and Mail, 24 September 1983). Likewise, the creation of the new Federal Youth Ministry is evidence of the increasing official recognition of the potential seriousness of the youth unemployment problem. Echoing the Prime Minister's comments, we find the newly appointed youth minister asserting that "if we don't tackle the problem globally -- by all of the partners in society -- a generation will be sacrificed or a generation will revolt" (Globe and Mail, January 30 1984). Their embittered, demoralized status makes the young unemployed particularly vulnerable to political extremism

of either the 'far left' or the 'far right'. A related concern is that the levels of youthful unemployment might fuel the flames of racism: that in a tight job market non-whites become an easy target for pent-up frustrations. As the Rev. William Ryan stated recently in The Globe and Mail (9 December 1983): "We don't have a revolution on our hands now. But there are the seeds of trouble if something doesn't happen, if we go on having 11%, 12%, 13% unemployment, and remembering that real unemployment is higher." Political scientists have also echoed these predictions of social unrest, speculating that just as in the 1930s jobless young people will resort to political protest (Allentuck, 1983:8).

How well grounded are fears about the social and political consequences of youth unemployment? Drawing on available literature, we wish to suggest that the sincerity of these apprehensions notwithstanding, the current unemployment problem is not likely to generate the political unrest feared by many.

Certainly there are competing views on this issue, as even the most cursory review of relevant scholarly literature would reveal. A powerful argument presented by Piven and Cloward in their book, Regulating the Poor (1971:3) asserts: "when mass unemployment leads to outbreaks of turmoil, relief programs are ordinarily initiated or expanded to absorb and control enough of the unemployed to restore order..." The functions of unemployment relief apply to the political turbulence sparked by the depression of the 1930s in both the U.S. and Canada (see Neatby, 1972 and Struthers, 1983 on Canada). But is the same type of social control explanation relevant today given the political quiescence of the unemployed? Obviously the rise of the welfare state -- a response to the crisis of the 1930s -- has provided a means of cushioning the threat that economic recessions may pose to social stability. However, one possible counter-trend, undermining the "safety net" effect of the social welfare system, is that today's workers have an entirely different set of expectations. Derber

(1978), for example, argues that most individuals now consider a good job one of their basic rights. Especially pronounced among working class youth, this feeling of "universalistic entitlement," in Derber's view, could fuel collective political responses to chronic job scarcity.

Running counter to the above views is the argument that, rather than sparking collective political initiatives aimed at economic change, unemployment creates individual despair and isolation. As Bakke's (1940) research on the unemployed during the 1930s found, such individuals lacked organizational resources for pursuing common interests. Facing this, most jobless people typically retreated from the political arena into personal isolation, alienation and despondency. Reflecting on U.S. unemployment during the 1970s, Scholzman and Verba (1980) note striking differences from the 1930s in terms of political responses. It is indeed paradoxical that even though high unemployment is a burning political issue, those most affected exert little political pressure to improve job opportunities.

Regardless of its specific ideological direction, a political response to unemployment would entail collective action. On balance, the available research tends toward the view that unemployed youth in Western industrial societies, instead of flocking to join existing political parties or creating new radical ones, adapt to their predicament by a passive and largely individualistic withdrawal from a society which, in their eyes, has rejected them. Rather than undermining the political status quo, most of the negative consequences of youth unemployment are limited to the victims themselves. Although conclusive evidence is hard to come by, the connection between youth unemployment and such essentially private troubles as drug and alcohol abuse and suicide is better empirically documented than the relationship between unemployment and the primarily public problem of political dissent. Recall that our earlier

discussion clearly established a link between unemployment and psychological distress -- the very conditions which underlie behaviour characterized by withdrawal and isolation.

Given the lack of Canadian evidence, we must turn to recent British research for additional insights into the lack of political involvement among youthful unemployed. An in-depth study of 47 unemployed males and females aged 17 to 21 living in the North East of England found that only two were involved in any kind of political action (one belonged to a fringe left-wing group; the other supported an animal welfare rights candidate in a local election). The researchers conclude that the majority of their sample is "politically uneducated, not to say, apathetic...political action is conspicuous by its absence (Coffield, Borrill and Marshall, 1983:332)." Consistent with other British and American data on the adult unemployed, this study also found that youth without work are freqently very isolated. Denied access to workplace social relationships, they spend large amounts of time at home alone. The apolitical nature of the youthful response to unemployment has similarly been reported in another recent British study. The specific policies of the Thatcher government were not cited with any regularity as an explanation of the situation experienced by 87 unemployed persons age 17 to 21 living in Birmingham (New Society, 1983:34). The obvious political inactivity among the youthful jobless in Canada lends plausibility to the same interpretation for this country.

Hence we would argue from available evidence that fears about the revolutionary potential of unemployed youth are groundless. Rather than radicalizing the young, the experience of unemployment breeds apathy, a sense of hopelessness, and alienation of the most passive kind. Youth unemployment warrants societal concern and governmental intervention not because it threatens to wreak social chaos through radical politics but primarily because it is

personally destructive to those who experience it. At the same time, however, the long-term effects of these personal troubles may well undermine the work ethic on which capitalist society depends. In this sense, chronically high youth unemployment indeed has serious societal implications.

5) Conclusions

A useful way to recap our discussion of the social and psychological impact of unemployment is to return to our three initial research questions. With respect to the first -- do the unemployed and the employed differ significantly on personal, work-related and financial characteristics? -- we found that the jobless are less educated, and are likely to be blue-collar workers with a history of unemployment and with a spouse not in the labour force. Our second question focussed on the social-psychological impact of being out of work. Not surprisingly, the jobless in our sample reported lower levels of satisfaction with their health, non-work activities and standard of living. Perhaps the most important distinction between the unemployed and the employed is the significantly higher level of depresssion and feelings of powerlessness among the former. These findings underline how the experience of being without a job can have devastating personal consequences.

The third question asked whether the general climate of recession and record high levels of unemployment had a psychological effect on those still holding jobs. Our data show that Edmonton residents have had their feelings of job security and financial optimism about the future undermined by the recession. Finally, while unable to address with these data the pressing issue of youth unemployment, we drew on available research literature to argue that jobless youth are more likely to exhibit apathy than political mobilization. Of course, our findings regarding the high levels of depression and powerlessness among older unemployed workers are consistent with this position.

Practically speaking, strategies for dealing with the problems of unemployment should proceed on two levels. First there are a variety of programs for helping those currently unemployed cope with this reality. Individuals working in social service agencies should be aware that the 'buffers' provided by social supports have been shown to reduce a variety of mental and physical ill health symptoms associated with the stress of joblessness (Figueira-McDonough, 1978; Gore, 1978). A study of unemployed Detroiters, for instance, found that access to concrete help for meeting everyday needs -- such as baby-sitting, transportation, and referral services -- was a major buffer to psychological strain (Figueira-McDonough, 1978). It is equally essential to recognize that the unemployed are not a uniform group. Single parents, for example, may be much harder hit financially than a laid-off spouse in a dual-earner family (Moen, 1983). Special services, and additional income maintenance, are clearly required for especially vulnerable groups.

The above strategy provides relief, but not necessarily a solution. The fundamental problem remains: the economy presently is unable to provide jobs for all those wanting to work. Canada appears to be recovering from the recession, yet many of the jobs eliminated due to layoffs and firm closures may never be regained. In specific terms, of the 569,000 jobs lost in this recession, only 377,000 have been recovered (Globe and Mail, 6 February 1984). Only about one in four jobs lost in manufacturing, energy, mining and construction have been gained back. Most of the newly created employment opportunities have been in the service sector, where pay typically is lower and more jobs are part-time. In short, a huge challenge facing Canadians and their governments today is job creation. We often identify the causes of our unemployment problem in world market conditions, in the collapse of the OPEC cartel or other developments beyond our borders. We are less inclined to look at our own government policies

and industrial strategies for possible causes and potential solutions. It is instructive to note that during the period from 1972 to 1981 (before the current global economic crisis) both the U.S.A. and the U.K. kept pace with Canada in terms of unemployment rates, while countries like Japan and Sweden managed to keep their rates around 1 or 2% (Economic Council of Canada, 1982:5). Clearly there are better ways to run an industrial economy. Only a concerted effort to forge a new national industrial strategy holds promise for renewed economic prosperity and greater employment opportunities.

FOOTNOTES

1. While other sources suggest that youth unemployment is most severe, we have relatively few young unemployed individuals in our sample. The average age (mid-30s) for both employed and unemployed may reflect the lower probability of young, single adults appearing in such a sample. This may be because younger individuals living with their parents are less likely to be chosen as respondents in sampled households, or because some of the young unemployed may be fairly transient.

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